

Created from harbor muck, new stretch of Hart-Miller Island open to public



The beach area of Hart-Miller Island State Park is seen from an observation tower. The Maryland Park Service is making 300 acres of the interior of the island open to the public. Previously, only the beach area and some shoreline campsites were open to the public. The island was rebuilt using material dredged from Baltimore's shipping channels.

(Pamela Wood / Baltimore Sun)



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Creating Hart-Miller took decades, cost millions and involved a legal fight that went to the Supreme Court.

More than 30 years after the first piles of muck dredged from Baltimore's harbor were used to create an island at the mouth of the Back River, state officials are opening 300 acres of Hart-Miller Island to public access.

Starting Friday, visitors to the island near Essex can ride bikes or hike along trails to its interior, past wetlands and marshes where red-winged blackbirds flit between cattails and ospreys soar overhead.

Previously, visitors — who must arrive by boat — were relegated to a sandy beach and a handful of no-frills camping sites.

"It's just a beautiful spot," said Ranger Dean Hughes, assistant manager of Gunpowder Falls, North Point and Hart-Miller Island state parks.

The journey to create a park on the island has taken decades, cost millions of dollars and involved a legal fight that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The idea for putting dredged material on Hart-Miller dates to the late 1960s. At the time, as Baltimore's shipping channels were dredged to allow access for large ships, the spoil was placed in open water alongside those channels.



Auto importer to open terminal at Sparrows Point

Officials wanted to put the dredged material on contained sites so it wouldn't slip back into the channels or contaminate the water. But when the state announced plans to buy two eroding islands, Hart and Miller, and rebuild them with spoil, there was passionate outcry from eastern Baltimore County residents.

"They were worried about a number of things — number one, that it would seep through and pollute the area around the island and it would obstruct boating traffic," said retired state [Sen. Norman Stone](#), a Democrat who represented the area in Annapolis for more than 50 years.



Scientists give Chesapeake Bay its highest environmental grade since 1992

"I was part of the opposition," said Stone. "It was a long fight."

Opponents took their case to court, appealing all the way to the Supreme Court — which declined to hear the case. The issue also factored in political careers. It was a spark that drew Republican Helen Delich Bentley, who supported the Hart-Miller plan, to run against U.S. Rep. Clarence Long, a longtime Democratic incumbent who opposed it. Bentley lost in 1980 and 1982, then beat Long in 1984.

Once the battles played out, crews built a giant dike encircling the islands in 1981. The first shipments of dredged harbor material arrived in 1984 and continued until 2009.

All told, 100 million cubic yards of dredged material have been placed at Hart-Miller Island, which now covers 1,100 acres.

Today, dredged material from the [Baltimore Harbor](#) is taken to disposal sites at Cox Creek near Pasadena and Masonville Cove in Curtis Bay. Dredged material from channels in the Chesapeake Bay is disposed at Poplar Island, an island reclamation project in Talbot County.

Hart-Miller technically has room for more material, but state lawmakers mandated that the program conclude by the end of 2009, said Chris Correale, director of harbor development for the Maryland Port Administration.

The 1,100 acres on Hart-Miller are split into two sections.

The 300-acre southern section, which was completed first, features wetlands, ponds and forests. This is the part that's now being opened to the public, with gravel roads for construction equipment turned into hiker-biker paths. The 800-acre northern section is a work in progress, with dredged material sitting and drying out. Crews from the Maryland Environmental Service will monitor the pH and nutrient levels in the material, coaxing it into a state where plants can grow.

Eventually, it will be planted with trees and shrubs and also opened to the public.

The southern section will be open to the public only when the Maryland Park Service's rangers are present. For the summer, the area will be staffed Thursdays through Mondays from 11 a.m. until 4 p.m.

Hughes said he hopes to start educational programs, such as nature hikes and bird walks.

"There are incredible bird-watching opportunities," he said, noting that nearly 300 species have been documented on the island, including cardinals, sparrows, swallows, killdeer, Canada geese, black ducks and downy woodpeckers. Hart-Miller is already wildly popular with boaters in the summer. On some weekends, hundreds of boats anchor off the island. Now the park rangers hope to lure boaters onto the island to take a walk and learn about wildlife.

Paul Brylske grew up in Dundalk and spent summers with his buddies from Sparrows Point High School in the 1970s taking small boats out to the islands for water skiing, crabbing and goofing off.

He vividly remembered people protesting the plans to put dredge material on the islands, and said even as an adult, he wasn't sold on the idea.

When he returned to eastern Baltimore County after college, he was recruited to join a citizens' oversight committee for Hart-Miller. Gradually, he changed his mind.

"I started very skeptical," Brylske said. "After sitting there year after year, hearing the effort put into monitoring and people's commitment — and not really having issues — you understand that a project like that ... is pretty special."

Brylske said the islands have come full circle, and are once again a recreational destination — only bigger now.

He said the citizens' oversight committee will focus on making sure the island has good amenities and programs for visitors.

"Maybe it's just a slab of soil, but it's pretty remarkable," he said.

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